

ANALYSIS OF SSB 5148

***House Agriculture & Ecology Committee
23, 1999***

March

<p>Reauthorizing the Permit Assistance Center</p>

Background:

The Permit Assistance Center was established by law within the Department of Ecology in 1995. The Center is designed to provide assistance to businesses and public agencies in order to facilitate their compliance with the state's environmental quality laws in an expedited fashion. The Center was also mandated to provide a formal process for coordinating environmental permit processes for applicants with complex projects who may use this process at their option and expense. The Center currently has a staff of 2.6 FTEs and a biennial budget of \$309,000. The legislation establishing the center includes a sunset clause. Without reauthorization, the Center will close on June 30, 1999.

In a sunset review of the center, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee: (1) found that Ecology had complied with the Legislature's intent in establishing the center and in implementing the coordinated permit process; (2) made recommendations for improving the center's efficiency and effectiveness including modifying the center's reporting requirements; and (3) recommended re-authorizing the center.

Summary:

The repeal clauses are repealed, allowing the center to continue operating. The center reporting requirements are changed from annual to biennial and expanded. Biennial reports must include recommendations for streamlining and coordinating environmental permitting. In addition, reports must recommend ways to improve public participation in permitting processes and to improve the public's trust and confidence in the permitting process.

The regulatory agencies involved in implementing the Center's responsibilities are authorized to enter into cost-reimbursement agreements with project applicants to recover the costs relating

to the implementation of statutory requirements as they relate to permit review, processing, and coordination. Priority for the use of general fund monies at the center is given to coordination and services for small projects. Small projects are defined as those projects for which the applicants do not enter into a cost-reimbursement agreement and which are limited by number of permits, number of employees, and completed assessed value. Permits agencies are provided the option of assigning work to permanent employees, temporary employees, or technical consultants.